

Channels

In Focus

[Analysis](#)
[Cartoons](#)
[Environment](#)
[Going Inner](#)
[News](#)
[Opinion](#)
[Photo Essays](#)

Columns

[Business](#)
[My Word](#)
[PlainSpeak](#)
[Random Thoughts](#)

India Nest

[Architecture](#)
[Astrology](#)
[Ayurveda](#)
[Buddhism](#)
[Cinema](#)
[Culture](#)
[Dances](#)
[Festivals](#)
[Hinduism](#)
[History](#)
[People](#)
[Places](#)
[Sikhism](#)
[Spirituality](#)
[Vastu](#)
[Vithika](#)

Society & Lifestyle

[Family Matters](#)
[Health](#)
[Parenting](#)
[Perspective](#)
[Recipes](#)
[Society](#)
[Teens](#)
[Women](#)

Creative Writings

[Book Reviews](#)
[Ghalib's Corner](#)
[Humor](#)
[Individuality](#)
[Literary Shelf](#)
[Love Letters](#)
[Memoirs](#)
[Musings](#)
[Poetry](#)
[Quotes](#)
[Ramblings](#)

[Stories](#)
[Travelogues](#)
[Workshop](#)

Computing

[CC++](#)
[Computing Articles](#)
[Flash](#)
[Internet Security](#)
[Java](#)
[Linux](#)
[Networking](#)

Hinduism

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Does Hinduism Teach That All Religions are The Same? - 1

by Prof. Dr. Frank Gaetano Morales

It is by no means an exaggeration to say that the ancient religion of Hinduism has been one of the least understood religious traditions in the history of world religion. The sheer number of stereotypes, misconceptions and outright false notions about what Hinduism teaches, as well as about the precise practices and behavior that it asks of its followers, out-number those of any other religion currently known. Leaving the more obviously grotesque crypto-colonialist caricatures of cow-worshipping, caste domination and “*sutee*” aside, even many of the most fundamental theological and philosophical foundations of Hinduism often remain inexplicable mysteries to the general public and supposed scholars of Hindu Studies. More disturbing, however, is the fact that many wild misconceptions about the beliefs of Hinduism are prevalent even among the bulk of purported followers of Hinduism and, alarmingly, even to many purportedly learned spiritual teachers, gurus and swamis who claim to lead the religion in present times.

Of the many current peculiar concepts mistakenly ascribed to Hindu theology, one of the most widely misunderstood is the idea that Hinduism somehow teaches that all religions are equal...that all religions are the same, with the same purpose, goal, experientially tangible salvific state, and object of ultimate devotion. So often has this notion been thoughtlessly repeated by so many - from the common Hindu parent to the latest swamiji arriving on American shores yearning for a popular following - that it has now become artificially transformed into a supposed foundation stone of modern Hindu teachings. Many Hindus are now completely convinced that this is actually what Hinduism teaches.

Despite its widespread popular repetition, however, does Hinduism actually teach the idea that all religions are really the same? Even a cursory examination of the long history of Hindu philosophical thought, as well as an objective analysis of the ultimate logical implications of such a proposition, quickly makes it quite apparent that traditional Hinduism has never supported such an idea.

The doctrine of what I call “Radical Universalism” makes the claim that “all religions are the same.” This dogmatic assertion is of very recent origin, and has become one of the most harmful misconceptions in the Hindu world in the last 150 or so years. It is a doctrine that has directly led to a self-defeating philosophical relativism that has, in turn, weakened the stature and substance of Hinduism to its very core. The doctrine of Radical Universalism has made Hindu philosophy look infantile in the eyes of non-Hindus, has led to a collective state of self-revulsion, confusion and shame in the minds of too many Hindu youth, and has opened the Hindu community to be preyed upon much more easily by the zealous missionaries of other religions. The problem of Radical Universalism is arguably the most important issue facing the global Hindu community today. In the following, we will perform an in-depth examination of the intrinsic fallacies contained in this inherently non-Hindu idea, as well as the untold damage that Radical Universalism has wrought in modern Hinduism.

What's a Kid to Do?

Indian Hindu parents are to be given immense credit. The daily challenges that typical Hindu parents face in encouraging their children to maintain their commitment to Hinduism are enormous and very well-known. Hindu parents try their best to observe fidelity to the religion of their ancestors, often having little understanding of the religion themselves other than what was given to them, in turn, by their own parents. All too many Indian Hindu youth, on the other hand, find themselves un-attracted to a religion that is little comprehended or respected by most of those around them – Hindu and non-Hindu alike.

Today's Hindu youth seek more strenuously convincing reasons for following a religion than merely the argument that it is the family tradition. Today's Hindu youth demand, and deserve, cogent philosophical explanations about what Hinduism actually teaches, and why they should remain Hindu rather than join any of the many other religious alternatives they see around them.

Temple priests are often ill equipped to give these bright Hindu youth the answers they so sincerely seek...mom and dad are usually even less knowledgeable than the temple pujaris. What is a Hindu child to do?

As I travel the nation delivering lectures on Hindu philosophy and spirituality, I frequently encounter a repeated scenario. Hindu parents will often approach me after I've finished my lecture and timidly ask if they can have some advice. The often-repeated story goes somewhat like this:

“We raised our son/daughter to be a good Hindu. We took them to the temple for important holidays. We even sent him/her to a Hindu camp for a weekend when they were 13. Now at the age of 23, our child has left Hinduism and converted to the (fill in the blank) religion. When we ask how could they have left the religion of their family, the answer that they throw back in our face is: ‘but mama/dada, you always taught us that all religions are the same, and that it doesn't really matter how a person worships God. So what does it matter if we've followed your advice and switched to another religion?’”

Many of you currently reading this article have probably been similarly approached by parents expressing this same dilemma. The truly sad thing about this scenario is that the child is, of course, quite correct in her assertion that she is only following the logical conclusion of her parents' *often-repeated mantra* of “all religions are the same.”

If all religions are exactly the same, after all, and if we all just end up in the same place in the end anyway, then what does it really matter what religion we follow?

Hindu parents complain when their children adopt other religions, but without understanding that it was precisely this highly flawed dogma of Radical Universalism, and not some inherent flaw of Hinduism itself, that has driven their children away. My contention is that parents themselves are not to be blamed for espousing this non-Hindu idea to their children. Rather, much of the blame is to be placed at the feet of today's ill equipped Hindu teachers and leaders, the supposed guardians of authentic Dharma teachings.

In modern Hinduism, we hear from a variety of sources this claim that all religions are equal. Unfortunately, the most damaging source of this fallacy is none other than the many un-informed spiritual leaders of the Hindu community itself. I have been to innumerable *pravachanas*, for example, where a benignly grinning guruji will provide his audience with the following tediously parroted metaphor, what I call the Mountain Metaphor.

The Mountain Metaphor:

“Truth (or God or Brahman) lies at the summit of a very high mountain. There are many diverse paths to reach the top of the mountain, and thus attain the one supreme goal. Some paths are shorter, some longer. The path itself, however, is unimportant. The only truly important thing is that seekers all reach the top of the mountain.”

While this simplistic metaphor might seem compelling at a cursory glance, it leaves out a very important elemental supposition: it makes the unfounded assumption that everyone wants to get to the top of the same mountain! As we will soon see, not every religion shares the same goal, the same conception of the Absolute (indeed, even the belief that there is an Absolute), or the same means to their respective goals. Rather, there are many different philosophical “mountains”, each with their own very unique claim to be the supreme goal of all human spiritual striving. As I will show, Radical Universalism is not only an idea that is riddled with self-contradictory implications, but it is a doctrine that never originated from traditional Hinduism at all.

A Tradition of Tolerance, Not Capitulation

Historically, pre-colonial classical Hinduism never taught that all religions are the same. This is not to say, however, that Hinduism has not believed in tolerance or freedom of religious thought and expression. It has very clearly always been a religion that has taught tolerance of other valid religious traditions. However, the assertion that

- (a) we should have tolerance for the beliefs of other religions, is a radically different claim from the overreaching declaration that
- (b) all religions are the same.

And this confusion between two thoroughly separate assertions may be one reason why so many modern Hindus believe that Hindu tolerance is synonymous with Radical Universalism. To maintain a healthy tolerance of another person’s religion does not mean that we have to then adopt that person’s religion!

Traditional Hinduism has always been the most tolerant, patient and welcoming of all religions. Hinduism is not a religion that persecutes others merely for having a difference in theological belief. Hindu India, for example, has been the sole nation on earth where the Jewish community was never persecuted. This is the case despite the presence of Jews in India for over 2000 years. Similarly, Zoroastrian refugees escaping the destruction of the Persian civilization at the hands of Islamic conquerors were greeted with welcome refuge in India over 1000 years ago. The Zoroastrian community (now known as the Parsee community) in India has thrived in all these many centuries, living together with their Hindu neighbors in peace and mutual respect. Hinduism has been a religion that has always sought to live side-by-side peacefully with the followers of other, non-Hindu, religions, whether they were the indigenous Indian religions of Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism or the foreign religions of Christianity and Islam.

In keeping with the Vedic adage that the guest in one’s home is to be treated with as much hospitality as one would treat as a visiting divinity, Hinduism has always been gracious to the followers of non-Hindu religions, and respectful of the gods, scriptures and customs of others. The tolerance and openness of Hinduism has been historically unprecedented among the wider community of world religions, universally acclaimed, and very well attested.

The common mistake that is often made, however, is to mistake the long-held

THE COMMON MISTAKE that is often made, however, is to mistake the long held Hindu tradition of tolerating other religions with the mistaken notion that Hinduism consequently encourages us to believe that all religions are exactly the same. We have mistaken Hindu tolerance with Radical Universalism.

The leap from tolerance of other faiths to a belief that all religions are equal is not a leap that is grounded in logic. Nor is it grounded in the history, literature or philosophy of the Hindu tradition itself.

Uniquely Hindu: The Crisis of the Hindu Lack of Self-Worth

In general, many of the world's religions have been periodically guilty of fomenting rigid sectarianism and intolerance among their followers. We have witnessed, especially in the record of the more historically recent Western religions, that religion has sometimes been used as a destructive mechanism misused to divide people, to conquer others in the name of one's god, and to make artificial and oppressive distinctions between "believers" and "non-believers". Being an inherently non-fundamentalist world-view, Hinduism has naturally always been keen to distinguish its own tolerant approach to spirituality vis-à-vis more sectarian and conflict oriented notions of religion. Modern Hindus are infamous for bending over backwards to show the world just how non-fanatical and open-minded we are, even to the point of denying ourselves the very right to unapologetically celebrate our own Hindu tradition.

Unfortunately, in our headlong rush to devolve Hinduism of anything that might seem to even remotely resemble the closed-minded sectarianism sometimes found in other religions, we often forget the obvious truth that Hinduism is itself a systematic and self-contained religious tradition in its own right. In the same manner that Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Taoism, or Jainism have their own unique and specific beliefs, doctrines and claims to spiritual authority, all of which fall within the firmly demarcated theological bounds of their own unique traditions, Hinduism too has just such Hindu-centric theological and institutional bounds. Like every other religion, Hinduism is a distinct and unique tradition, with its own inbuilt beliefs, world-view, traditions, rituals, concept of the Absolute, metaphysics, ethics, aesthetics, cosmology, cosmogony, and theology. The grand, systematic philosophical construct that we call Hinduism today is the result of the extraordinary efforts and spiritual insights of the great rishis, yogis, acharyas and gurus of our religion, guided by the transcendent light of the Vedic revelation, that has stood the test of time. It is a tradition that is worthy of healthy celebration by Hindus and respectful admiration by non-Hindus.

Hindus have no more reason to be uncomfortable with the singular uniqueness of our own spiritual tradition, or less of a reason to boldly assert our own exceptional contributions to the development of global religious thought, than do the followers of any other venerable faith. This is an obvious, yet all too often forgotten, fact the importance of which cannot be overstated: Hinduism is its own uniquely independent religious tradition, different and distinct from any other religion on earth. There is a Hindu philosophy, a Hindu world-view, a Hindu set of ethics, a Hindu theology, a Hindu spiritual culture, a Hindu view on the nature of God (*Ishvara*), personhood (*jiva*) and material reality (*jagat*). In short, there is a distinctly Hindu tradition.

Such a recognition of Hinduism's unique features is not to deny that there will always be several important similarities between many of the religions of the world. Indeed, the human impetus to know Truth being a universally experienced phenomenon, it would be quite surprising indeed if there were not some common features discernable in all the diverse religions of our common earth. While interesting commonalities and similarities can always be seen and appreciated

interesting commonalities and similarities can always be seen and appreciated, however, it would be misleading to consequently deny that Hinduism, like every other separate religious tradition, is also to be plainly contrasted in myriad ways from any other religion. Such a realization and acceptance of Hinduism's unique place in the world does not, by any stretch of the imagination, have to lead automatically to sectarianism, strife, conflict or religious chauvinism. Indeed, such a recognition of Hinduism's distinctiveness is crucial if Hindus are to possess even a modicum of healthy self-understanding, self-respect and pride in their own tradition. Self-respect and the ability to celebrate one's unique spiritual tradition are basic psychological needs, and a cherished civil right of any human being, Hindu and non-Hindu alike.

Letting the Tradition Speak for Itself

When we look at the philosophical, literary and historical sources of the pre-colonial Hindu tradition, we find that the notion of Radical Universalism is overwhelmingly absent. The idea that "all religions are the same" is not found in the sacred literature of Hinduism, among the utterances of the great philosopher-acharyas of Hinduism, or in any of Hinduism's six main schools of philosophical thought (the *Shad-darshanas*). Throughout the history of the tradition, such great Hindu philosophers as Vyasa, Shankara, Ramanuja, Madhva, Vallabha, Vijnana Bhikshu, Swami Narayana (Sahajananda Swami), and others made very unambiguous and unapologetic distinctions between the religion of Hinduism and non-Hindu religions. The sages of pre-modern Hinduism had no difficulty in boldly asserting what was, and what was not, to be considered Hindu. And they did so often! This lucid sense of religious community and philosophical clarity is seen first and foremost in the very question of what, precisely, constitutes a "Hindu". Without knowing the answer to this most foundational of questions, it is impossible to fully assess the damaging inadequacies of Radical Universalist dogma.

Who is a Hindu?

Remarkably, when the question of who is a Hindu is discussed today, we get a multitude of confused and contradictory answers from both Hindu laypersons and from Hindu leaders. That we have such a difficult time understanding the answer to even so fundamental a question as "*who is a Hindu?*" is a starkly sad indicator of the lack of knowledge in the Hindu community today.

Some of the more simplistic answers to this question include:

- Anyone born in India is automatically a Hindu (the ethnicity fallacy);
- if your parents are Hindu, then you are Hindu (the familial argument);
- if you are born into a certain caste, then you are Hindu (the genetic inheritance model);
- if you believe in reincarnation, then you are Hindu (forgetting that many non-Hindu religions share at least some of the beliefs of Hinduism);
- if you practice any religion originating from India, then you are a Hindu (the national origin fallacy).

The real answer to this question has already been conclusively answered by the ancient sages of Hinduism, and is actually much simpler to ascertain than we would guess.

The two primary factors that distinguish the individual uniqueness of the great world religious traditions are

- (a) the scriptural authority upon which the tradition is based, and
- (b) the fundamental religious tenet(s) that it espouses.

If we ask the question what is a Jew?, for example, the answer is: someone who accepts the Torah as their scriptural guide and believes in the monotheistic concept of God espoused in these scriptures.

What is a Christian?: a person who accepts the Gospels as their scriptural guide and believes that Jesus is the incarnate God who died for their sins.

What is a Muslim?: someone who accepts the Qur'an as their scriptural guide, and believes that there is no God but Allah, and that Mohammed is his prophet.

In general, what determines whether a person is a follower of any particular religion is whether or not they accept, and attempt to live by, the scriptural authority of that religion. This is no less true of Hinduism than it is of any other religion on earth. Thus, the question of what is a Hindu is similarly very easily answered.

By definition, a Hindu is an individual who accepts as authoritative the religious guidance of the Vedic scriptures, and who strives to live in accordance with Dharma, God's divine laws as revealed in the Vedic scriptures.

In keeping with this standard definition, all of the Hindu thinkers of the six traditional schools of Hindu philosophy (*Shad-darshanas*) insisted on the acceptance of the scriptural authority (*shabda-pramana*) of the Vedas as the primary criterion for distinguishing a Hindu from a non-Hindu, as well as distinguishing overtly Hindu philosophical positions from non-Hindu ones. It has been the historically accepted standard that, if you accept the Vedas (meaning the complete *shruti* and *smrti* canon of the Vedic scriptures, such as the four Vedas, Upanishads, Mahabharata, Ramayana, Bhagavad Gita, Puranas, etc.) as your scriptural authority, and lived your life in accordance with the Dharmic principles of the Vedas, you are then a Hindu. Thus, any Indian who rejects the authority of the Veda is obviously not a Hindu – regardless of their birth. While an American, Canadian, Russian, Brazilian, Indonesian or Indian who does accept the authority of the Veda obviously is a Hindu. One is Hindu, not by race, but by practice.

Clearly Defining Hinduism

Traditional Hindu philosophers continually emphasized the crucial importance of clearly understanding what was Hinduism proper and what were non-Hindu religious paths. You cannot claim to be a Hindu, after all, if you do not understand what it is that you claim to believe, and what it is that others believe. One set of antonymous Sanskrit terms repeatedly employed by many traditional Hindu philosophers were the words *vaidika* and *avaidika*. The word *vaidika* (or “Vedic” in English) means one who accepts the teachings of the Veda. It refers specifically to the unique epistemological stance taken by the traditional schools of Hindu philosophy, known as *shabda-pramana*, or employing the divine sound current of Veda as a means of acquiring valid knowledge. In this sense the word “*vaidika*” is employed to differentiate those schools of Indian philosophy that accept the epistemological validity of the Veda as *apaurusheya*, or a perfect authoritative spiritual source, eternal and untouched by the speculations of humanity, juxtaposed with the *avaidika* schools that do not ascribe such validity to the Veda. In pre-Christian times, *avaidika* schools were clearly identified by Hindu authors as being specifically Buddhism, Jainism and the atheistic Charvaka school, all of whom did not accept the Veda. These three schools were unanimously considered non-Vedic, and thus non-Hindu (they certainly are geographically Indian religions, but they are not theologically/philosophically Hindu religions). Manu, one of the great ancient law-givers of the Hindu tradition, states the following in his *Manava-dharma-shastra*:

All those traditions and all those disreputable systems of philosophy that

are not based on the Veda produce no positive result after death; for they are declared to be founded on darkness. All those doctrines differing from the Veda that spring up and soon perish are ineffectual and misleading, because they are of modern date. (XII, 95)

Stated in simpler terms, “*vaidika*” specifically refers to those persons who accept the Veda as their sacred scripture, and thus as their source of valid knowledge about spiritual matters.

In his famous compendium of all the known Indian schools of philosophy, the *Sarva-darshana-samgraha*, Madhava Acharya (a 14th century Advaita philosopher) unambiguously states that Charvakins (atheist empiricists), “Baudddhas” (Buddhists) and “Arhatas” (Jains) are among the non-Vedic, and thus non-Hindu, schools. Conversely, he lists Paniniya, Vaishnava, Shaiva and others among the Vedic, or Hindu, traditions. Likewise, in his *Prasthanabheda*, the well-known *Madhusudana Sarasvati* (fl. 17th century C.E.) contrasts all the *mleccha* (or “barbaric”) viewpoints with Hindu views and says that the former are not even worthy of consideration, whereas the Buddhist views must at least be considered and debated. The differentiation between “orthodox” and “heterodox”, from a classical Hindu perspective, rests upon acceptance of the Vedic revelation, with the latter rejecting the sanctity of the Veda. As a further attempt to clearly distinguish between Hindu and non-Hindu, Hindu philosophers regularly used the Sanskrit terms *astika* and *nastika*. The two terms are synonymous with *vaidika* and *avaidika*, respectively. *Astika* refers to those who believe in the Vedas, *nastika* to those who reject the Vedas. Under the *astika* category Hinduism would include any Hindu path that accepts the Veda, such as Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Shaktism, Advaita, Yoga, Nyaya, Mimamsa, among others. The *nastika* religions would include any religious tradition that does not accept the Veda: Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Christianity, Islam, Baha’i, etc. Thus when it came to the importance of unambiguously differentiating between the teachings of Hinduism and the teachings of non-Hindu religions, the most historically important sages of Hindu philosophical and theological thought were clearly advocates of *Vaidika* Dharma – Hinduism - as a systematic, unitive tradition of spiritual expression.

Dharma Rakshaka: The Defenders of Dharma

With the stark exception of very recent times, Hinduism has historically always been recognized as a separate and distinct religious phenomenon, as a tradition unto itself. It was recognized as such by both outside observers of Hinduism, as well as from within, by Hinduism’s greatest spiritual teachers. The saints and sages of Hinduism continuously strived to uphold the sanctity and gift of the Hindu world-view, often under the barrages of direct polemic opposition by non-Hindu traditions. Hindus, Buddhists, Jains and Charvakins (atheists), the four main philosophical schools found in Indian history, would frequently engage each other in painstakingly precise debates, arguing compellingly over even the smallest conceptual minutia of philosophical subject matter. The sages of Hinduism met such philosophical challenges with cogent argument, rigid logic and sustained pride in their tradition, usually soundly defeating their philosophical opponents in open debate.

Shankara Acharya, as only one of many examples of Hindu acharyas defending their religion, earned the title “*Digvijaya*”, or “Conqueror of all Directions”. This indomitable title was awarded Shankara due solely to his formidable ability to defend the Hindu tradition from the philosophical incursions of opposing (*purva-paksha*), non-Hindu schools of thought. Indeed, Shankara is universally attributed by both scholars, as well as later, post-Shankaran Hindu leaders, with being partially responsible for the historical decline of Buddhism in India due to his

partially responsible for the historical decline of Buddhism in India due to his intensely polemic missionary activities. No Radical Universalist was he!

The great teacher Madhva is similarly seen as being responsible for the sharp decline of Jainism in South India due to his immense debating skills in defense of *Vaidika* Dharma. All pre-modern Hindu sages and philosophers recognized and celebrated the singularly unique vision that Hinduism had to offer the world, clearly distinguished between Hindu and non-Hindu religions, and defended Hinduism to the utmost of their formidable intellectual and spiritual abilities. They did so unapologetically, professionally and courageously. The Hindu world-view only makes sense, has value, and will survive if we all similarly celebrate Hinduism's uniqueness today.

Traditional Hinduism Versus Neo-Hinduism

A tragic occurrence in the very long history of Hinduism was witnessed throughout the 19th century, the destructive magnitude of which Hindu leaders and scholars today are only beginning to adequately assess and address. This development both altered and weakened Hinduism to such a tremendous degree that Hinduism has not yet even begun to recover. The classical, traditional Hinduism that had been responsible for the continuous development of thousands of years of sophisticated culture, architecture, music, philosophy, ritual and theology came under devastating assault during the 19th century British colonial rule like at no other time in India's history. For a thousand years previous to the British Raj, foreign marauders had repeatedly attempted to destroy Hinduism through overt physical genocide and the systematic destruction of Hindu temples and sacred places. Traditional Hinduism's wise sages and noble warriors had fought bravely to stem this anti-Hindu holocaust to the best of their ability, more often than not paying for their bravery with their lives. What the Hindu community experienced under British Christian domination, however, was an ominously innovative form of cultural genocide. What they experienced was not an attempt at the physical annihilation of their culture, but a deceptively more subtle program of intellectual and spiritual annihilation. It is easy for a people to understand the urgent threat posed by an enemy that seeks to literally kill them. It is much harder, though, to understand the threat of an enemy who, while remaining just as deadly, claims to seek only to serve a subjugated people's best interests.

During this short span of time in the 19th century, the ancient grandeur and beauty of a classical Hinduism that had stood the test of thousands of years, came under direct ideological attack. What makes this period in Hindu history most especially tragic is that the main apparatus that the British used in their attempts to destroy traditional Hinduism were the British educated, spiritually co-opted sons and daughters of Hinduism itself. Seeing traditional Hinduism through the eyes of their British masters, a pandemic wave of 19th century Anglicized Hindu intellectuals saw it as their solemn duty to "Westernize" and "modernize" traditional Hinduism to make it more palatable to their new European overlords. One of the phenomena that occurred during this historic period was the fabrication of a new movement known as "neo-Hinduism". Neo-Hinduism was an artificial religious construct used as a paradigmatic juxtaposition to the legitimate traditional Hinduism that had been the religion and culture of the people for thousands of years. Neo-Hinduism was used as an effective weapon to replace authentic Hinduism with a British invented version designed to make a subjugated people easier to manage and control.

The Christian and British inspired neo-Hinduism movement attempted to execute several overlapping goals, and did so with great success:

- The subtle Christianization of Hindu theology, which included concerted attacks on iconic imagery (*archana*, or *murti*), panentheism, and continued belief in

the

beloved gods and goddesses of traditional Hinduism.

- The imposition of the Western scientific method, rationalism and skepticism on the study of Hinduism in order to show Hinduism's supposedly inferior grasp of reality.
- Ongoing attacks against the ancient Hindu science of ritual in the name of simplification and democratization of worship.
- The importation of Radical Universalism from liberal, Unitarian/Universalist Christianity as a device designed to severely water down traditional Hindu philosophy.

The dignity, strength and beauty of traditional Hinduism was recognized as the foremost threat to Christian European rule in India. The invention of neo-Hinduism was the response. Had this colonialist program been carried out with a British face, it would not have met with as much success as it did. Therefore, an Indian face was used to impose neo-Hinduism upon the Hindu people. The resultant effects of the activities of Indian neo-Hindus were ruinous for traditional Hinduism.

The primary dilemma with Hinduism as we find it today, in a nutshell, is precisely this problem of

- (a) not recognizing that there are really two distinct and conflicting Hinduisms today, Neo-Hindu and Traditionalist Hindu; and
- (b) with Traditionalists being the guardians of authentic Dharma philosophically and attitudinally, but not yet coming to full grips with the modern world...i.e., not yet having found a way of negotiating authentic Hindu Dharma with an ability to interface with modernity and communicate this unadulterated Hindu Dharma in a way that the modern mind can most appreciate it.

Hinduism will continue to be a religion mired in confusion about its own true meaning and value until traditionalist Hindus can assertively, professionally and

intelligently communicate the reality of genuine Hinduism to the world. Until it learns how to do this, neo-Hinduism will continue its destructive campaign.

The non-Hindu Origins of Radical Universalism

Radical Universalism is neither traditional nor classical in its origin. The origins of the distinctly non-Hindu idea of Radical Universalism, and the direct paralyzing impact it has had on modern Hindu philosophy, can only be traced back to the early 19th century. It is an idea not older than two centuries, yet the results of which have been devastating for both the progress of serious Hindu philosophical development since the 19th century, as well as in its practical effect of severely undermining Hindu self-esteem. Its intellectual roots are not even to be found in Hinduism itself, but rather are clearly traced back to Christian missionary attempts to alter the genuine teachings of authentic Hinduism. Radical Universalism was the vogue among 19th century British educated Indians, most of who had little authentic information about their own Hindu intellectual and spiritual heritage. These westernized Indians were often overly eager to gain acceptance and respectability for Indian culture from a Christian European audience who saw in Hinduism nothing more than the childish prattle of a brutish colonized people. Many exaggerated stereotypes about Hinduism had been unsettling impressionable European minds for a century previous to their era. Rather than attempting to refute these many stereotypes about Hinduism by presenting Hinduism in its authentic and pristine form, however, many of these 19th century Christianized Indians felt it was necessary to instead gut Hinduism of anything that might seem offensively exotic to

the European mind. Radical Universalism seemed to be the perfect base-notion upon which to artificially construct a “new” Hinduism that would give the Anglicized 19th century Indian intelligentsia the acceptability they so yearned to be granted by their British masters.

We encounter one of the first instances of the Radical Universalist infiltration of Hinduism in the syncretistic teachings of Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833), the founder of the infamous *Brahmo Samaj*. A highly controversial figure during his life, Roy was a Bengali pseudo-intellectual who was heavily influenced by the teachings of the Unitarian Church, a heterodox denomination of Christianity. In addition to studying Christianity, Islam and Sanskrit, he studied Hebrew and Greek with the dream of translating the Bible into Bengali. A self-described Hindu “reformer”, he viewed Hinduism through a warped colonial Christian lens. The Christian missionaries had told Roy that traditional Hinduism was a barbaric religion that had led to oppression, superstition and ignorance of the Indian people. He believed them. More, Roy saw Biblical teachings, specifically, as holding the cherished key to altering traditional Hindu teachings to make it more acceptable to India’s colonial masters. In his missionary zeal to Christianize Hinduism, this Hindu “reformer” even wrote an anti-Hindu tract known as *The Precepts of Jesus: The Guide to Peace and Happiness*. It was directly from these Christian missionaries that Roy derived the bulk of his ideas, including the anti-Hindu idea of the radical equality of all religions.

In addition to acquiring Radical Universalism from the Christian missionaries, Roy also felt it necessary to Christianize Hinduism by adopting many Biblical theological beliefs into his new neo-Hindu “reform” movement. Some of these other non-intrinsic adaptations included a rejection of Hindu panentheism, to be substituted with a more Biblical notion of anthropomorphic monotheism; a rejection of all iconic worship (“graven images” as the crypto-Christians of the *Brahmo Samaj* phrased it); and a repudiation of the doctrine of avatars, or the divine descent of God.

Roy’s immediate successors, Debendranath Tagore and Keshub Chandra Sen, attempted to incorporate even more Christian ideals into this new invention of neo-Hinduism. Sen even went so far as concocting a *Brahmo Samaj* text that contained passages from a variety of differing religious traditions, including Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist. In his later years, Sen portrayed himself as a divinized prophet of the “New Dispensation”, which he felt replaced the Old and New Testaments, in addition to traditional Hinduism. With Sen’s continued descent into anti-Hindu apostasy and megalomania, the movement rapidly declined in importance and influence. The *Brahmo Samaj* is today extinct as an organization, but the global Hindu community is still feeling the damaging effects of its pernicious influence even at present.

The next two neo-Hindu Radical Universalists that we witness in the history of 19th century Hinduism are Ramakrishna (1836-1886) and Vivekananda (1863-1902). Though Vivekananda was a disciple (*shishya*) of Ramakrishna, the two led very different lives. Ramakrishna was born into a Hindu family in Dakshineswar. In his adult life, he was a Hindu temple priest and a fervently demonstrative devotee of the Divine Mother. His primary object of worship was the goddess Kali, whom he worshipped with intense devotion all of his life. Despite his Hindu roots, however, many of Ramakrishna’s ideas and practices were derived, not from the ancient wisdom of classical Hinduism, but from the non-Vedic religious outlooks of Islam and liberal Christianity. Though he saw himself as being primarily Hindu, Ramakrishna also resorted to worshipping in mosques and churches, and believed that all religions aimed at the same supreme destination. He experimented with Muslim, Christian and a wide variety of Hindu practices, blending, mixing and matching practices and beliefs as they appealed to him at any given moment. In

matching practices and beliefs as they appeared to him at any given moment. In 1875, Ramakrishna met Keshub Chandra Sen, the then leader of the neo-Hindu Brahmo Samaj, and formed a close working relationship with him. Sen introduced Ramakrishna to the close-knit community of neo-Hindu activists who lived in Calcutta, and would in turn often bring these activists to Ramakrishna's satsanghas.

Throughout his remarkable life, Ramakrishna remained illiterate, and wholly unfamiliar with both classical Hindu literature and philosophy, and the authentic teachings of the great acharyas who served as the guardians of those sacred teachings. Despite the severely obvious challenges that he experienced in understanding Hindu theology, playing upon the en vogue sentiment of religious universalism of his day, Ramakrishna ended up being one of the most widely popular of neo-Hindu Radical Universalists. The fame of Ramakrishna was to be soon eclipsed, however, by that of his most famous disciple.

Swami Vivekananda was arguably Ramakrishna's most capable disciple. An eloquent and charismatic speaker, Vivekananda will be forever honored by the Hindu community for his brilliant defense of Hinduism at the Parliament of World Religions in 1893. Likewise, Vivekananda contributed greatly to the revival of interest in the study of Hindu scriptures and philosophy in turn-of-the-century India. The positive contributions of Vivekananda toward Hinduism are numerous and great indeed. Notwithstanding his remarkable undertakings, however, Vivekananda found himself in a similarly difficult position as other neo-Hindu leaders of his day were. How to make sense of the ancient ways of Hinduism, and hopefully preserve Hinduism, in the face of the overwhelming onslaught of modernity? Despite some positive contributions by Vivekananda and other neo-Hindus in attempting to formulate a Hindu response to the challenge of modernity, that response was often made at the expense of authentic Hindu teachings. Vivekananda, along with the other leaders of the neo-Hindu movement, felt it was necessary to both water down the authentic Hinduism of their ancestors, and to adopt such foreign ideas as Radical Universalism, with the hope of gaining the approval of the European masters they found ruling over them.

Vivekananda differed quite significantly from his famous guru in many ways, including in his philosophical outlook, personal style and organizational ambitions. While Ramakrishna led a contemplative life of relative isolation from the larger world, Vivekananda was to become a celebrated figure on the world religion stage. Vivekananda frequently took a somewhat dismissive attitude to traditional Hinduism as it was practiced in his day, arguing (quite incorrectly) that Hinduism was too often irrational, overly mythologically oriented, and too divorced from the more practical need for social welfare work. He was not very interested in Ramakrishna's earlier emphasis on mystical devotion and ecstatic worship. Rather, Vivekananda laid stress on the centrality of his own idiosyncratic and universalistic approach to Vedanta, what later came to be known as "neo-Vedanta". Vivekananda differed slightly with Ramakrishna's version of Radical Universalism by attempting to superimpose a distinctly neo-Vedantic outlook to the idea of the unity of all religions. Vivekananda advocated a sort of hierarchical Radical Universalism that espoused the equality of all religions, while simultaneously claiming that all religions are really evolving from inferior notions of religiosity to a pinnacle mode. That pinnacle of all religious thought and practice was, for Vivekananda, of course Hinduism. Though Vivekananda contributed a great deal toward helping European and American non-Hindus to understand the greatness of

Hinduism, the Radical Universalist and neo-Hindu inaccuracies that he fostered have also done a great deal of harm as well.

In order to fully experience Hinduism in its most spiritually evocative and

philosophically compelling form, we must learn to recognize, and reject, the concocted influences of neo-Hinduism that have permeated the whole of Hindu thought today. It is time to rid ourselves of the liberal Christian inspired “reformism” that so deeply prejudiced such individuals as Ram Mohan Roy over a century ago. We must free ourselves from the anti-Hindu dogma of Radical Universalism that has so weakened Hinduism, and re-embrace an authentically classical form of Hinduism that is rooted in the actual scriptures of Hinduism, that has been preserved for thousands of years by the various disciplic successions of legitimate acharyas, and that has stood the test of time. We must celebrate traditional Hinduism. The neo-Hindu importation of Radical Universalism may resonate with many on a purely emotional level, but it remains patently anti-Hindu in its origins, an indefensible proposition philosophically, and a highly destructive doctrine to the further development of Hinduism.

Logical Fallacies of Radical Universalism

Radical Universalism is not a doctrine that we find anywhere in traditional Hindu texts, or taught by any of the classical Hindu acharyas. In addition to demonstrating the non-Hindu nature of Radical Universalism from a historical and literary perspective, however, it is also important to examine the validity of the claims of Radical Universalism from an overtly philosophical perspective. We need to see if the idea that “all religions are the same” even makes any objective rational sense at all. As we will now see, the dogma of Radical Universalism is riddled throughout with logical inconsistencies, contradictory assertions, ad absurdum implications, and self-defeating conclusions. In the following section of this work, I will examine some of the more absurd philosophical problems that naturally arise from attempting to uphold a Radical Universalist perspective. This will be done via applied philosophical assessment employing both propositional and veridical analysis, as well as original methodological procedures that I have personally developed for philosophical textual analysis.

We’re Not Superior...Therefore We’re Superior

Looking first at the very statement “All religions are the same” itself, we quickly discover our first problematic instance of circular logic. Let us assume for the sake of argument that Radical Universalism is the consensus opinion among modern Hindus. Modern Hinduism would then be, of course, the only major world religion that upholds this notion of radical equality. As we know, present day (as well as historically instantiated) leaders of Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam would all vehemently disagree with this statement that “All religions are the same”. These religions all reject any notion of Radical

Universalism. Each of these individual major religious traditions is quite vocal in their assertion that their own unique paths, concepts of the Absolute, and soteriological perspectives (theories on the means to achieve spiritual freedom) exclusively reflects their own idiosyncratic traditions. More, they would all assert with equally vociferous force that their own exclusive path holds a clearer insight into Truth, and a surer means for salvation, than does any other faith on earth. Why, after all, would someone even be a member of x religion and not y religion if they did not feel that x religion had something to offer that y religion did not? No other major religion outside of modern neo-Hinduism teaches that “all religions are the same”. If Hinduism did actually teach the doctrine of Radical Universalism, modern Hinduism, then, would be the singular instance of a major world religion teaching that “all religions are the same”.

The problem that is created is that since only Hinduism is supposedly teaching the “truth” that “all religions are the same”, and since no other religion seems to be aware of this “truth” other than modern day Hinduism, then Hinduism is naturally superior to all other religions in its exclusive possession of the knowledge that “all

superior to all other religions in its exclusive possession of the knowledge that all religions are the same". In its attempt to insist that all religions are the same, Radical Universalism has employed a circular pattern of logic that sets itself up as being, astoundingly, superior to all other religions. Thus, attempting to uphold the very claim of Radical Universalism leads to a situation in which Radical Universalism's very claim is contradicted. A good way to see the inherent circular logic of this claim is to conduct a formal propositional analysis of the argument.

Radical Universalist Fallacy I

1. Modern Hinduism is the only religion that supports Radical Universalism.
2. Radical Universalism states that "All religions are the same."
3. No other religion states or knows that "All religions are the same."
4. Since a) no other religions know the truth that "All religions are the same", and since b) only Hinduism knows the truth that "All religions are the same", only Hinduism knows the truth of all religions.
5. Only Hinduism knows the truth of all religions.
6. Therefore, Hinduism is both distinct and superior to all religions.
7. Therefore, given Hinduism's distinctness from and superiority to all religions: not all religions are the same.
8. Since all religions are not the same, therefore Radical Universalism is untrue.

It is clear and apparent that the groundless affirmation of Radical Universalism by lesser-informed contemporary neo-Hindu teachers leads to an inescapable spiral of self-defeating logic. In its very attempt to supposedly level the theological playing field by claiming that "all religions are the same", Radical Universalism is automatically compelled to assert its own inherent superiority, and to assign to itself the status of the sole possessor of the "truth" that all religions are the same, thus negating its original claim in its entirety. In essence, what neo-Hindu apologists of Radical Universalism are saying is: "Since only we possess the knowledge that all religion are equal, then we must be the best." That being the case, of course, all religions are then not equal.

Radical Universalism and Ethical Relativism

A further problem caused by Radical Universalism is that it necessarily leads to ethical relativism. If "all religions are the same", after all, then by inferential extension all the various ethical systems taught by these different religions must also be the same. To state that they are not is to undermine the very basis of Radical Universalism's claim. Ethical Relativism is a modern, Western philosophical view that claims there are no objective, discernable ethical standards that apply to humanity. There is no transcendent spiritual basis, or even any categorically sufficient rational maxims, for any ethical rules or behavior. Thus, on Ethical Relativism's account, God is not the author of humanity's inborn, inherent sense of right and wrong; and neither can moral standards be discerned through the power of reason. Indeed, Ethical Relativism believes that the existence of any objective moral norms is merely an illusion. There are really no right or wrong actions. There are merely fleetingly subjective rules that apply to a particular individual, at a given time, in a given situation (another name for this modern dogma is thus Situational Ethics). Being an atheistic and materialist doctrine, Ethical Relativism would relegate such religious moral principles as compassion, justice, truthfulness, loving others, and non-violence to the realm of meaninglessness, thus rendering any sense of ethical behavior without ultimate merit or purpose outside of the purely functional value such principles might possess in an immediate and individual given situational instance in time.

- Continued

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➤ Hinduism recognises that there are many ways of achieving salvation.Nirvana etc. So naturally there is built in toerance to other religion. Shivaji when given a book of Koran said " god is visibkle to different people in different forms" So insulting other's god is same as insulting our own god. You cannot quote scriptures and get confused on such matters. You have to see it in Ptactice in the society. Scriptures say many things including Upanishads say" god is not one whom you are praying to" This it says without even questioning whom we pray to

M G Hariharan
06/13/2011

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